

"The doublure of the body in Contemporary Latin American Literature:
Reading the Hypertelos of Woman"

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Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* is an example of such of a novel which takes up the task of reinterpreting history as a means of recuperating lost identities while questioning the historically inscribed heroes and antiheroes of the Conquest through an examination of the bodies and language of history. Boullosa, a Mexican writer, uses the body of Montezuma as a trope for cultural loss and plenitude, as the lost corpus of identity that is inevitably reconstructed by three women who encounter Moctezuma where the Great Tenochtitlan once was: in the Parque Hundido in Mexico City. This narrative weaves the stories of three temporalities: these three women from 1989; Moctezuma taken out of his time, 1519; and the author's own narrative time as she inserts, throughout the story her own narrative self-conscious, reflecting her own processes of writing history, of interpreting identity. Boullosa's novel directs the body as the epicenter for creation and recreation, as Montezuma, formed "sin madre" awakens and discovers that he is enclosed in his body, that he is alive:

"Cerró los ojos, se encerró en su cuerpo. Se diría que el cuerpo incómodo le está ardiendo, que respirar por primera vez, despertar después de siglos, era estar en aceite hirviendo y soportar adentro de la piel frita un enorme cuerpo enfermo. Sale él de ahí, sale y vuelve a salir, pegajoso, sale, o empieza a salir arrancado por una estampida de imágenes:" (p. 14).

Montezuma breaks through the physical barrier of death and pain to revive his body, bringing language to the physical body and the immersing the body in language and meaning.¹ Boullosa mixes history with fantasy, dream with reality, past with present.

¹ When Moctezuma awakens, he feels pain all over his body, "me arde la piel" and "todo el cuerpo me duele, me duele", he repeats (p. 48): "Es fácil imaginarlo: despertar después de muerto, despertar en otro sitio, en otro tiempo, entre tres rostros extraños, extranheros del todo, y encima de lo ya dicho un barniz de violencia, dolor del cuerpo, dolor de parto en un cuerpo de adulto, acabado de pasar por el canal de la sangre, los apretujones, los crujidos de huesos. Un segundo nacimiento.

She does not order the narrative chronologically, but consciously distorts and flips time; hence the reader receives the text as one long interpolation of a history that is never coded as “true”, but which is wrested upon the thresholds of history, fiction, fantasy and reality, with no true understanding of each individual moment.

Taking historical texts and renarrating them (the codexes are clearly woven within her narrative), Boullosa weaves together fantasy and popular consciousness of Montezuma and brings him “to life”, once more. Here Moctezuma has “*el sueño*” and then “*un sueño, uno hacía mucho tiempo*” whereby he confuses his body in time, for he cannot confirm what reality he is living, nor what past he once lived. Awakening in the same space of his death, Parque Hundido, in a physical form that is living, yet dead, Montezuma does not recognize his body. Like Quetzalcóatl in the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, Montezuma is “given” his body, only he does not know what to do with it:

¿Qué soñó? Que la ciudad, caída nueve veces cincuenta y dos años antes de la fecha de esta aparición (la insólita de Motecuzohma en el Parque Hundido) despertaba a su propio callado bullicio...Un hombre enorme rubio, enorme, casi brillante. Conforme se acerca a él, su tamaño disminuye. Se vuelve opaco, desteñido. Su piel, un poco rojiza, parece como inflamada, como desagradablemente abotagada. Las líneas en la piel no parecen hundidas, sino bordadas, sobrepuestas. Parecería enfermo, pero conforme más se acerca más se parece su piel a la de un puerco de monte. Huele mal (pp. 20-21).

Boullosa reincarnates Montezuma’s body as a means of inspecting the roots of Mexican history and of the myth of the *chingado*, the man who let the Spanish “take him”. Boullosa mixes history with dream, as Montezuma is a character who innocently approaches the world, as if he were a child. He remembers his death, though it seems much more like a dream than a reality to him—he is sacrificed on the pyramid and his body, like his memory, desecrated.² And in the present of Boullosa’s narrative, Montezuma finds himself split between past and present, straddling life and death, and ultimately unable to decide if he is human or god:

“Puedo estar vivo. Pero no en mi cuerpo. Puedo ser piedra, colibrí, pluma, oro... Podría (por qué no) estar sobre la superficie de la tierra contemplando. Vería que en la vida nunca habrá fin, que la vida no terminará nunca. Podría, siendo piedra, tener ojos por el recuerdo; podría ser colibrí o pluma y pensar y sentir, por el recuerdo de lo que algún día fui, eso lo acepto, así como confirmar que el cielo está y que el cielo guarda en su presencia mi memoria, y me hace

Miedo, angustia, congoja; es fácil imaginar...” (p. 49).

² Montezuma remembers his death in Boullosa’s text: “Brinco sobresaltado y sobresaltado el que empuja la daga retrocede y yo brinco pero no puedo brincar, los grillos me lo impiden y entre dos me sostienen retirando sus rostros del mío para que yo no pueda reconocerlos, me sostienen volcándome boca abajo, lastiman más mis muñecas heridas y digo o quiero decir ¡qué pasa! cuando siento el dolor en mis carnes huecas, siento la daga destrozándome y oigo un vocerío que me impide sentir el dolor y oigo las voces de todos ellos, las que he llegado a conocer tan bien y para mi desgracia, embarrándose las unas con las otras, sucias, las que me han mentido y no terminan de matarme y oigo que dicen: dejen su cuerpo entero, no lo lastimen, déjenlo entero y alguien contesta es que no se ha muerto y le dice el que habló mueve la daga, clávala más hondo, rómpele las carnes, destrózalo pero déjalo entero porque tenemos que mostrarlo, déjalo entero, ahí déjalo, que se desangre, por qué vinieron estas bestias aquí, a estar entre nosotros, qué buscan, están enfermos sus corazones y jalonean algo entre ellos y oigo una voz que dice no debimos hacerlo, él siempre fue noble y generoso con nosotros y luego otro le dijo no vinimos a tener conmisericordias, tiene que ser nuestra ya la ciudad antes de que...” (p. 27).

sentir presente cuando ha tiempo que he muerto. Pero no puedo tener el cuerpo que tenía en Tenochtitlan. Esto querría decir que el desorden y la vacilación han llegado a la tierra, querría decir que la vida podrá terminar porque las piedras han dejado de serlo, y el cielo ya no lo es, ni las plumas ni los colibríes aleteando... Ni el viento. Ni el sol: el final sobrevendría sobre la tierra si yo regresara con un cuerpo que he perdido, anunciando que el final llegará, que el final está a punto de llegar aquí..." (p. 29).

Here Montezuma questions his physical being, wondering if he is stone, hummingbird, feather, or gold—each embodiment which would give him a different insight into seeing history, or a sense of feeling and remembering. In imagining his body in these reincarnations of gold and feathers, however, he also wonders if might have become a god or even a representation of a god. As he confesses that he can never have his body of Tenochtitlan, his current embodiment confirms that which he once lost while conterminously announcing the “end”, that history is about to finish *aquí*. Boullosa’s novel is one of a Montezuma who has come back from the dead to reclaim a history that was never his, to rectify that which was never understood or even recorded. Montezuma’s putrefying body becomes the rhetorical instrument for understanding identity of the history never written.

Working from historical accounts of the Conquest, *Llanto* questions the limits of historical authority while taking the body of Montezuma and posturing it as that which was never real, but always configured from outside.³ This outside space is a multiple space incorporating the Spanish who imprisoned and, according to some accounts, killed Montezuma; the indigenous who felt betrayed by Montezuma and who, according to other accounts, killed him; and the outside is most distinctively the narrative process through which language isolates through naming, eliding, and contorting realities. Likewise the structure of the novel addresses, through the division of chapters, the spaces of memory, history, and fantasy of Moctezuma. For instance, the chapter entitled, “Se enojaron los dioses...” (primer fragmento de novela), wherein the narrative of authorship, of writing history and of fiction come together in a dialogical network of voices contesting and reaffirming one another, writing—literally and metaphorically—the body, as Boullosa likens the written text of history to the scripted corporeality of *the creation*:

³ In one scene, Boullosa notes how the cadaver of Montezuma was used by the Spanish to “fool” the people: “Cuando sacaron al cadáver para engañarlos con que iban a oír las palabras de su emperador, olvidaron poner la música que antecede su aparición, los tambores, la invocación, porque aunque fuere su prójimo en cuanto al ser de hombre, en cuanto al oficio era como un dios. Todo era falso, y el cuerpo que alguien detenía para que no cayera (pues si era un muerto) se repetía a sí mismo las palabras que le habían sido dichas el día de su coronación: ‘¿Qué hará si en su tempo se destruye su reino, o nuestro señor enviase sobre usted su ira, enviando pestilencia? ¿Qué hará si en su tiempo se destruye su reino, o nuestro señor enviase sobre usted su ira, enviando pestilencia? ¿Qué hará si en su tiempo se destruye ell reino y su resplendor se volviese en tiniebla?’ Pero dejó el orden de sus recuerdos cuando sintió sobre su carne muerta, en la frente, una piedra lanzada desde allá abajo y se dijo: ‘No es para mí, es para Hernando Cortés, porque quién no se dará cuenta de que me han matado, pero me ha atinado a mí, en la frente’ y cuando terminó de decirse esta frase, cambió el curso de su pensamiento y dejó que sus venas de sangre ya inmóvil y un poco descompuesta babearan sangre en el lugar en que habían aventado la piedra, en su frente, y cambió el curso de sus recuerdos: ‘Muchos tienen envidia a los señores y reyes por tener lo que tienen y comer lo que comen pan de dolor. Señor, no piense que el estado real y el trono y dignidad es deleitoso y placentero, que no es sino de gran trabajo, y de grade aflicción y de gran penitencia’” (p. 32).

“Si exagerara, faltando literalmente a la verdad, se comprendería mejor que aquel polvo acabó siendo en un caso lo que a continuación aparece; si exagerara diría que el polvo, la ceniza, la arenilla se transformó en tinta, en tinta solamente. Pero mi exageración, puesto que lo es, no sería información precisa, porque el polvo se transformó también en la manera que el escritor tuvo de entender lo que el polvo le dice, también en su negativa para escribir lo que el polvo le pide, y en su deseo de escribir una novela en la que sabe no podrá avanzar, una novela que sabe no podrá escribir y cuyo deseo de ser llevada a cabo él trata de ahogar separándose de ella y que lo llevó a anotar palabras de la siguiente manera:” (p. 36).

Boullosa's narrative weaves together the polysemous texts within the synapses that cultural identity embodies. *Llanto* takes the *neobarroco* of historical identities gone “mad”, and reincorporates them into a story that calmly searches for those fragments that were lost, while resuscitating a dialogue over time that works with the interrupted spaces of narrative and the violent renderings of body. Ultimately, Boullosa's text confirms that memory is that which must be created since there is no memory in Mexico of this specific period, only fantasy and incongruities that do not nurture identity, but rather kill it: “El que no tiene memoria es un asesino y puede matar, y mata...” (p. 66). For this very reason Boullosa focuses on the body as a means of accessing memory—the body as meat for the novel and memory is the violence:

“El recuerdo es carne de la novela. El olvido es armonía. El recuerdo es violencia. El olvido es serenidad. Incluso estas enormes e indescifrables piedras no son nada en el olvido, ni guijarros tirados al lado del camino. Estarían enterradas. El recuerdo desentierra. Saca los muertos al sol. Nos hace carne de muerte: carne para novela...Así que no debo dudar en continuar escribiendo mi versión de la vida de Moctezuma II. No tengo de qué dudar, siempre he trabajado con piedras, siempre he tratado de indagar (en la sabiduría ajena y en la fantasía) cómo eran esas piedras de las que escribo cuando estaban coloreadas, recubiertas de plumas, piedras preciosas, piedras pulidas, vivas, útiles, sonriendo o llorando entre los hombres” (p. 60-61).

Text is therefore an antithetical space where memory *desentierra*—memory takes the bodies out of the ground and *reincorporates* them within the text. The writer, like the stone worker of Montezuma's time, has the task of representing the world, smiling and crying, in the labor of representation. Boullosa does not idealize the act of writing, for she admits that it is linked to the fantastical; nor does she idealize Montezuma. But in recreating the scene of Montezuma's reincarnation, she allows us to reread his person from the inside out, whereby the rotting body becomes the locus of truth rather than the glorified hand of Spanish Conquistadores. Emphasizing that there were never any direct inscriptions of his thought, that all understanding of Montezuma was imposed from the outside, Boullosa's novel narrates Montezuma's understanding of the Conquista taking the interstitial incongruences from the official narratives—of which there are many—and weaving them together with the mythology of Montezuma embedded within Mexican folklore:⁴

⁴ Boullosa's narrator problematizes the absence of Montezuma's voice in historical narratives: “Sabios quienes al contar nuestra historia olvidan disertar acerca de las razones de su raro comportamiento, como los que lo adjudican a que en la llegada de los españoles él vio el retorno de

“Sabios quienes al contar nuestra historia olvidan disertar acerca de las razones de su raro comportamiento, como los que lo adjudican a que en la llegada de los españoles él vio el retorno de Quetzalcóatl y lleno de culpa y temor dejó que tomaran lo que lespertenecía y de inmediato pasan a disertar durante cientos de cuartillas acerca de lo que representó para occidente el encuentro con este mundo. Son sabios, porque sólo del mundo que arrasó hay suficientes indicios. Tenemos con qué saber qué sintió, pensó, opinó Felipe II o Carlos V, pero en cambio de Moctezuma no quedaron indicios. Ni huesos, ni se señas de cómo era su pensamiento, ni nada de nada” (p. 75).

The body is the focal point for rewriting history and thus the text is the space for giving Montezuma a voice. As such Boullosa renders the text the metaphor for the somatic and the sexually charged arena of confronting the past: “La angustia está en el cuerpo, y el alivio natural que consiguen los cuerpos cuando se besan o acarician o penetran es un alivio doloroso. Pero es, al fin, alivio” (p. 104). While the pain of confronting the truth disrupts the peace of silence and forgetting, it also releases the pain, freeing that which could never be heard before.

Discussing the basis for writing this novel, the narrator as “author” argues against historical interpretations which contend that Montezuma was killed by his people, stoned to death by the Mexicas. Instead, the narrator discusses her motivation for rewriting history since as she believes, the body of the Tlatoani, Montezuma, was consistently utilized to shape accounts of the Conquest that reflected positively upon the Spaniards. Indeed *Llanto* questions Montezuma’s cowardice, positing this representation as a contrivance of the west that ultimately serves to legitimate the Conquest and weaken the image of the indigenous:

“Deserté del primer Moctezuma que vi, el hombre que recibió anuncios o presagios de lo que iba a ocurrir (algunos hermosísimos, otros divertidos o asombrosos, en todos los casos “antojo”, golosina para el narrador); deserté del hombre que murió de una pedrada en la frente; deserté del supersticioso; deserté del que me convocó a escribir *Llanto*. buscando una verdad en la cual fundar a mi personaje, perdí mi novela...Deserté del hombre que murió de una pedrada porque no creo que el pueblo mexica se haya atrevido a alzar la mano contra su Tlatoani sino contra el cadáver con él cual pretendían engañarlo, al escribir sus crónicas, en mostrar la mejor imagen del ellos mismos, y asesinar a un hombre en cautiverio para una maniobra que no fue oportuna no era algo que debiera dar a conocer; deserté de la idea del hombre atribulado, indeciso, aterrorizado y vacilante porque creo que se ve a Moctezuma vacilar o actuar como un cobarde desde la idea de Occidente de lo que es un cobarde y un hombre que vacila ante una guerra que él no tenía por qué entender...(Me pregunto, ¿por qué me preocupa no será que aquello de lo que yo he desertado es de la novela? ¿Ahora qué soy, si ya no soy novelista?)” (pp. 96-97).

Demystifying Montezuma’s cowardice and asserting it as a construction of the

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occident, Boullosa attempts to reread Montezuma by deconstructing her own position as chronicler/novelist. By demonstrating that the difference between the chronicler of history and the writer of fantasy is an illusion, Boullosa opens up her novel through an interesting *mestizaje* of historical and fictional narratives. In short, she blurs their differences through the juxtaposition of their images, truths and fantasies.⁵ Often, the reader is left wondering if the fantasy might not be truer than the historical narrative.

Deconstructing the body of gendered identity, Boullosa confirms that the identities of Montezuma and La Malinche are completely undermined in many of the “official” accounts of the Conquest. As discussed earlier, La Malinche was very well perceived as the leader of the Conquest in many of the historical accounts. Likewise, Boullosa positions La Malinche as the true leader, the “real” *capitán*, by refuting her identity as a passive victim of the Spaniards while delineating her as a very active agent in the Conquista.⁶ Montezuma, conversely, is not reinscribed as the *macho* defender of the Aztecs in *Llanto*, but is effeminized in Boullosa’s story as a way of representing this leader as human, as part of a larger cosmology of the universe. Though she does not ascribe qualities of cowardice to Montezuma, Boullosa reconfigures his presence in history as a leader who is confronted with his end in history as he refuses this inscription: “Creemos ver venir nuestro fin; somos nosotros quienes lo hemos trazado. Algo le ha dado guerra a la humanidad; algo somos nosotros. Alguien nos propone una manera distinta de entender espacio, tiempo, cuerpo, idea, representación, imagen, ese alguien somos nosotros” (p. 98). Montezuma struggles with his loss of voice within history since throughout this narrative, his putrefying body is evidenced as the last enigmatic fragment of in a complex history. Montezuma’s identity has long been interred beneath the narratives that had previously justified the Conquistadores and it is up to the women of this novel to recuperate his lost identity.

And this is where the novel begins and ends, in the midst of the Aztec empire where today lies a huge public park under which, presumably, Montezuma’s body remains. And it is in this most unlikely space that Laura, Luisa and Margarita, drunk after a party, stop in the Parque Hundido to talk only to discover Montezuma. It is this place where Aztec civilization meets the modern day Mexican woman *in narrative*, where Boullosa’s story brings together the *mestizaje* of diverse times, bodies and gendered performances. For it is Laura who finds Montezuma, picks him up, and carries him in her arms, passing houses, parked cars, electricity poles as he begins to weep—Laura tells him: “Ya, no llores, ahora te llevo conmigo, ya todo pasó...” (p. 53).

⁵ Boullosa writes of the novelist: “El novelista se entrega a dos viajes radicalmente distintos cuando escribe. En uno, su conciencia y su imaginación lo obligan a alejarse, a irse más allá, donde ni el sentido del sinsentido es posible...En el otro camino, el escritor entra a la vena del Hombre y él mismo es sangre placentera corriendo con gusto en los pasajes de la historia. Al trabajar con la lengua, con las palabras, el escritor escucha hablar al hombre y sabe que no está solo, que él no es nada solo: se coloca en el territorio donde la novela es imposible” (pp. 110-111).

⁶ Boullosa evidences La Malinche as the captain of the Conquest: “[C]uando llevamos al Capitán Malinche, a Hernando Cortés, a visitar el jardín donde conviven todos los animales, él y sus hombres no comportían nuestro asombro. Estaban asustados, me preguntaban que parra qué había yo puesto a todas estas bestias aquí y yo no hallaba cómo explicar que en este jardín se guardan todos los animales que hay en mi imperio y más allá, hasta donde mis embajadores han hollado y han podido cazar” (p. 29).

Demonstrating an incredible sense of compassion for this Aztec ruler, Boullosa confirms that identity is not a composite of public opinion, but rather that which lies —literally and figuratively— under the surface:

“Como me toca ser franca, porque a fin de cuentas esto solamente lo escribo para mí, decir que imagino muy bien el trecho final de la novela, pero que en cambio me parece imposible todo el cuerpo, el primer cuerpo, el de la amistad. Porque qué demonios de literatura puede ser ésa, esa en la que los personajes escuchan y comprenden entre sí las palabras y no hay distancia, o por lo menos hay la ilusión de que entre ellas no hay distancia y de que en dicha ilusión va la mirada del escritor clavada, como la espada en el toro, clavada, y no provoca sangre o derramamiento” (pp. 45-46).

As such Boullosa invokes the body of Montezuma as a necessarily contradictory and interrupted space where one narrative cancels out another, and where all identities are in a perpetual trajectory of disagreement, dismantling and restructuring. Hence, Boullosa offers literature as the surface upon which the demons of history might reinscribe and dismantle one another in a continual process of negotiation and affirmation. As she compares the use of language to the saber in the bull that does not provoke damages, Boullosa views literature as that arena which “pins down meaning”, but does not *bleed*. Ultimately, Boullosa views Montezuma as that figure of the Conquest whose powers were most underestimated and under-represented: “Moctezuma es entonces capaz de cualquier cosa. Bautizado, danzante, cantante, travestista o loco. Lo que fuera hubiera sido posible” (p. 107). Dancer across history, cross-dresser of the Spaniards—Montezuma is the historic figure who moves beyond the boundaries of the conceivable, who escapes representation, and who remains forever a marginal character of history because his voice, for so long, was silenced.⁷

Boullosa’s narrative ties together the contested voices that have escaped historic speculation and, more importantly, *Llanto* addresses the popular myth of Montezuma whose voice was taken away by virtue of its textual absence. Making the novel the vehicle for Montezuma’s reincarnation, Boullosa achieves the unthinkable: she reinvigorates the dead body while reconciling his spirit with the gods and the modern day Mexican. All this through the written word, representation—what Boullosa ascribes as the rectification and “reconciliation” of identity on paper:

“La voz que a mí me interesa escuchar en la novela, la voz que es verdad y carne, ésa no aparecería. Porque el mexica no ha roto con el mundo, las cosas (lo que él fabrica) no son vehículo de separación sino ingrediente de reconciliación con los dioses (voces del Mundo) y directamente con el mundo. El mexica no hiere los caminos con la risa helada de la rueda ni tampoco traiciona al Mundo de los dioses, a las cosas, con la palabra escrita. Reconcilia

⁷ Boullosa writes of Montezuma’s lack of voice: “De haber sido mudo, como es siempre mudo el viento, a nadie le habría importado... De haber sido mudo... Pero la garganta del viento insignificante era una garganta feroz, una garganta sangrienta, anónima y voraz, sin cuerpo y deseosa de otros cuerpos. Va cobrando cuerpo, la garganta del viento, y al pasar por los pies de los que van pasando o de aquellos que consigue en su tropiezo los va infectando, como si en lugar de ser viento fuera el turbulento paso de un infeccioso, contagioso que al plagar no perdonara a nadie ni a nada... De haber sido mudo no sería más que un estúpido viento incapaz de remontar altura, nada más que un viento imbécil, fardoso, vergonzoso, un viento a medias, un viento burocrático, bostezón, medio a medias, entredormido y entrevivo, un viento de nada” (p. 65).

sobre el papel, representa. Reconcilia sobre el papel, representa. No violenta sobre el amate, armoniza. Su representación escrita es puente y señalamiento" (p. 113).

Inscription of meaning on blank spaces, the interment of meaning and the resurrection of another—this is the task of the writer. Boullosa incorporates identity as a contentious, yet harmonious, space where meanings collide and reverberate, when meaning at times has no resonance, and where history remains in a perpetual state of dismantling and reconstruction. Ultimately, *Llantos* evidences the body and language as the nexus in which national, racial and historical identities are necessarily disassembled and demythified. It is this *raíz*, this essence, that Boullosa destroys—the essence of body, of language, of race and of any monolithic identity that might compel one to “possess” another. For *mestizaje* is the somatic nomination for the mixings of blood in Latin America, but likewise it is a metaphor upon which identity is based. This *mestizaje imposible*, like the body and language, is that which, according to Boullosa, maintains Mexican identity as a “negated certitude”, as that which will always be irreconcilable.⁸

Identity as “knowable” is an incredibly contentious issue in Latin America, not to mention many regions of the world which have suffered ruthless political regimes and brutal histories. Reinaldo Arenas’ *El mundo alucinante*, for instance, is a fantastic story which negotiation of cultural myths and historical texts. This novel addresses Fray Servando Teres de Mier Oriega y Guerra, a Catholic priest who spent much of his life escaping prison because of a famous sermon he made on 12 December, 1794, Mexico City, in which claimed that the Indies had been converted by St. Thomas long before the Spanish arrived. Moreover, Fray Servando maintained that the venerated image of the Virgin of Guadalupe did not date from the 1531 in which the indigenous Juan Diego had allegedly “seen” the virgin, but instead was impressed upon the cape of St. Thomas whom the Indians later called Quetzalcoatl. This theory provoked much scandal since the *criollos* (Europeans born in the colonies) were invested in revising Mexican history and identity in a period in which Mexican’s independence from Spain was quickly becoming a national fight. This new interpretation clearly made clear that the Spanish manipulated the Virgin of Guadalupe to legitimate the colonization of the Americas. This sermon caused Fray Servando to be arrested by

⁸ Boullosa writes of the *mestizaje* of Mexico and the *raíz rota*: “Cuando el vientecillo dijo ‘Fernando’ ¿quién hubiera podido oír que designaba al Conquistador, al Capitán Malinche, a Don Hernando?... Fernando fue el primero de todos los mexicanos, como se usa hoy la palabra mexicanos, castellanizando el mexica y arrebatándolo a sus antiguos poseedores. Fue el primer habitante de la nueva nación, el primero de todos nosotros, el fundador de una historia que entre sus raíces tiene una rota que nunca dejaremos de lamentar y de comprender seducidos por ella, una raíz que intentaremos arrasar, seducidos por ella, y alternadamente negaremos y vocearemos, y abandonaremos, sabiendo que ella nunca nos dejará, que siempre tendremos esa raíz rota, porque no es una elección, es una memoria india imborrable e imposible de evitar, irrecuperable e inalcanzable, el recuerdo de un dominio del mundo que hoy no puede tener imitación, un dominio que ya no está, que ya no se puede practicar, un dominio, un dominio de otra manera, basado en otro ejercicio del poder del hombre sobre el mundo y en otro hombre, otros dioses, otros afectos, otro lenguaje, y mientras una multitud india la conserva, como fue, idéntica y afuera de su propio tiempo, pervertida y purísima en el marco de una era que no le pertenece, la raíz se torna veneno puro y vitalidad exuberante en todo mexicano, certeza negada y habitada, de esencia irreconcilable, de mestizaje imposible, raíz propia y ajena, propia cuando afuera del territorio de su patria el poseedor la siente estrellarse adentro de las paredes de sus venas buscando desesperadamente la tierra, y ajena en su propio territorio, ajena adentro de al patria que le es propia, como algo invencible...” (pp. 117-118).

the Inquisition, to be sent back to Spain, and sentenced to ten years in a monastic prison. However, he escaped and was to spend the rest of his life travelling in Europe as a French Priest getting arrested many times though always managing to escape. *El mundo alucinante* locates the identity of resistance through transnationalism, transcorporality and transglobalism in such a way that the narrator identifies with Fray Servando, in much the same way that Arenas manifested in his political exile from Cuba. The narrator states at the beginning: “Lo más útil fue descubrir que tú y yo somos la misma persona” (p. 9). Ultimately, *El mundo alucinante* is a text which, like Boullosa’s *Llanto*, manifests the body as a baroque terrain upon which identities are deconstructed and through which desire is negotiated.

But the body in Latin America is not only the domain upon which identity is arrested from a past inscription and rewritten in the present-tense. Nor is the body the space for merely subverting former notions of language, place and belonging. In Latin American literature, the body is often the sphere of resistance in which the somatic ceases to exist—the body as tortured, the body as violated, the body as sick, the body as disappeared. These metaphors for identity are certainly not new to Latin American Literature with texts such as Manuel Puig’s *Beso de la mujer araña* which evidences the body as the terrain upon which identities are played out, through which fantasies are projected, and in which secrets are tortured out. Likewise, recent Argentine cinema such as Marco Bechis’ *Garage Olimpo* (2000), evidences the body of the political as the double domain of the body’s resistance to torture or of the body’s absence, its disappearance. This is the part of *realismo mágico* that Alejo Carpentier’s theory fails to take into account—the *barroco* as cruel, inhuman and as representative of the excessive brutality that humankind inflicts upon others. Yet the body of political repression is also a source of images, language and emotions where the *barroco* is strongly evidenced through the excessive meanings, colliding signs and the multifarious recreations of truth because, quite simply, the “truth” has been destroyed, murdered, and tortured. More often than not, the “truth” lies in the Atlantic Ocean where thousands of Argentines’ drugged bodies were ejected from airplanes during the repressive regime of the 1970’s.

The body of torture is often the locus of destabilization of meaning, whereby identity and knowledge are everything to the life of that body—belonging or not belonging to a specific group, knowing or not knowing certain information. The tortured body is a somatic surface upon which power is directly inscribed and policed—the body is motivated to produce certain information, and correspondingly punished if it does not. As Renato Martínez states:

Torture, no doubt, is directly related to this particular form of communication. Torture uses the body as morphological pieces which the syntax of repression puts in its most horrible discursive reality...Torture is also a secondary modeling system, a particular form of social intercourse that is consistent with the ideologically motivated symbolic universe. Through torture a privileged message is produced: “Do not mess with authority, for if you do your body will be terribly punished and your very existence will be made to disappear.” In such a system, the body of the disappeared represents, in the thought of Roland Barthes, a modern poetry in *Writing Degree Zero*, in the language of the body nature does not become a fragmented space. What one observes in torture is the recovering of nature as an epistemic opposition to pluralistic

culture, to writing, and to social texts in general (p. 86).

As such, the bodies of the disappeared in Chile, as Martínez discusses here, or those in Argentina, are the physical textures which are disposed of in an effort to efface history, to recover a lost “truth” or to “recover nature as an epistemic opposition”. At the heart of torture, this recovery of the *real*—the kernel of “truth”—is the motivation for the violence imposed upon the body. But where the body of torture lies—marked by the scarring of the electric prod, traversed by the various significations attached to it, violated by an unimaginable violence—also lies the *body of resistance*. The body as the object of torture represents a larger social body for whom the somatic doubles as the space of torture of the “social body”. The body of torture is robbed of its privacy and stripped of all autonomy and is thus made to represent symbolically the space of “public” punishment, where one must answer for the masses.⁹ This body is a somatic sphere upon which identity is literally enforced and where the somatic fights language, struggles not to give information, and battles memory. The body of torture problematizes heterogeneous identities, since it is exactly this embodiment of plurality which results in torture—the body must make singular knowledge and the subject must surrender itself to a homogeneity of language and thought. Like the body of the aristocratic female in Renaissance theatre, the state literally imposes order upon the body of the individual in order to assert the state’s order and logic, while also communicating to others the state’s power.¹⁰

Alicia Partnoy’s *The Little School* is one of many *testimonios* in Latin America which deals with the body political repression. Specifically, this *testimonio* analyzes torture and disappearance by putting into writing—making visible—the approximately 30,000 disappeared during Argentina’s “dirty war” from 1976 through 1983. Many *testimonios* have spoken out against political oppressions of various sorts—from Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* of the murder of the indigenous in the Quiché, Guatemala, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, to Elena Poniatowska’s work within the genre of *testimonio* such as *La noche de Tlatelolco*, a weaving together of voices dozens of participants and witnesses to a major protest in

⁹ Jean Franco, in her article, “From Public Space to the Fortified Enclave: Neoliberalism’s Effect on the Latin American City”: “Torture, a commonplace of old dictatorial regimes, was modernized by the use of the electric prod. The application of electric shock had, in the 1940s and 1950s, been widely used in attempts to cure or modify behavior of mental patients. In the southern cone and Central America, the electric prod became the torture instrument of choice, used both to change rebels into submissive citizens and as a painful threshold to death. Only in a few cases were the military able to convert former militants into informers. But this was perhaps less important to them than the dissemination of fear, which led most people to withdraw into the privacy of their homes and apartments. Torture and disappearance became effective deterrents to public action and created a form of social amnesia that has persisted in the era redemocratization” (p. 60).

¹⁰ Leonard Tennenhouse in his article, “Violence done to Women on the Renaissance Stage”, discusses violence in Renaissance theatre: “The body of an aristocratic female was the centerpiece of the spectacles of violence on stage had everything, in the Elizabethan period, to do with the Queen herself. She constantly encouraged an equation to be made between the health of her body, its wellbeing and integrity, and that of the state. During her reign, this iconic identification between the queen’s body and the land was such that the violence done to one was the same as violence to the other. Thus the theater regularly staged scenes of violence and disorder in order to materialize an opposition to the monarch over which monarchy asserted its order. On the Jacobean stage, however, the aristocratic female having acquired this usage had to be both different from the king’s body and yet essential to the purity of the aristocratic community. Once again, she was the site on which to stage an assault on the monarch. As a source of pollution, she empowered the monarch by subjugating her in a ritual that purified the community” (p. 79).

Mexico City during October, 1968 which resulted in the tortures and deaths of dozens of people. Like these *testimonios*, Partnoy's story is particularly evocative given that her narrative uses language to evoke the bodies of those disappeared—bodies that even the government and certain sectors of the public to this day refuse to acknowledge—while also using language as an aid to help her understand reality from fantasy. In Partnoy's text, language is incorporated as presence and as embodiment, while it also serves to delineate the absence, the literal non-existence, of thousands of people whose identities were wiped away from all traces of life, whose bodies were disposed in such a fashion that nobody seems to know where they are. Evidencing language as a presence which stands in for the non-presence of the *desaparecidos*, Partnoy's text *is* a metaphorical body as much as it is a literary work which weaves the space of the *neobarroco* as a terrain of simultaneous visibility of the excessive signs of torture and the invisibility of the *desaparecidos*.

The Little School treats the *desaparecidos* of Argentina from the viewpoint of the narrators, Partnoy and other prisoners, who while living in Bahía Blanca, were arrested and sent to *la Escuelita* for three and a half months. *The Little School* deals with the first months of disappearance where Partnoy recounts her experiences of captivity, exile, isolation, torture, and fear living in a cell with others, all of whom remained blindfolded and physically deprived of movement during their imprisonment:

I left my house for some days, just as a precaution. I named myself Rosa. Sometimes the whole affair of the alias seemed ridiculous. Giving it some thought I decided the aliases were probably okay in a little town, where everybody knows everybody else, where there is just one Bumersindo, one Pascual...but how do you find an Alicia in a city of hundreds of Alicias, a Carlos among thousands? We learned slowly. Each pebble of information helped create the avalanche that would crush the rest of our friends: the color of the hair, the inflection of the voice, the texture of the hands, the name, the nickname...details. By the time of my own avalanche, I was Rosa. When they came to arrest me, I didn't know whether they were coming for Rosa or Alicia, but it was for me that they came (p. 42).

Partnoy evidences how the body becomes the topographical locus for finding information, from which the state squeezes even the most minute traces of information which might advance the cause. As Partnoy uses an alias at the time of her arrest, identity in this space of secrecy and information becomes quite convoluted and virtually unintelligible—except, of course, for those who specialize in identifying bodies, the police. Partnoy's use of language to “protect” her body fails as even the alias “Rosa” cannot protect her true identity. It would seem that as language works to mask identity, it also backfires and serves as a trace that uncovers subversive markings that, like crumbs in the forest, leads straight to the object of inquiry.

The Little School is written with no regard for linear time—it is often recorded narratively backwards, with action beginning at the outset of each chapter and then returning to events by stepping back into time as if to make “reappear” the bodies that have been disappeared. At moments the narrative is circular where one torture reckons a past event and then the same torture is used—time is fragmented, the reader is dizzied within a vortex of memory, torture and a virtual fragmentation of the body. This text evidences a strong element of fantasy, of wanting to escape the

present, the body, the pain—Partnoy’s words evoke a desire to remember the past and realize the future. But the subject is “stuck” in the present, consumed with the quotidian experiences of a very uncertain future—for the narrative maintains a certain concern for the quotidian as a means of possibly deflecting the unpleasant thoughts of what might very well happen *if...*¹¹ Moving seamlessly between scenes of torture and scenes of the quotidian concern for meals and latrine visits, Partnoy weaves a narrative that hauntingly presents the reader with a textual reality of terror—of not knowing from one moment to the next what, exactly, will happen. This *testimonio* evidences the surreal juxtaposition of Partnoy’s memories of her plastic sandals in which she is arrested, to her memories of her daughter about whom she knows nothing, to her concern for her husband when he is being tortured. Piecing together fragmentary memories of torture along with the scant memories of the past and the hopes of the future, Partnoy terrorizes the reader by establishing a nexus into which the body is already absent and words attempt, in vain, to materialize those names.

Incidents such as the following begin with an action that seems to “go away” in the first lines of the narrative. But Partnoy has crafted her text such as to terrorize the reader with the narrative of exactly how terror seems to go away, or lessen—the subject seems to engage in dialogue and calm the agent of violence. And just as one thinks the violence is “over”, it comes back to haunt, to regain control and to mark the body with its pervasiveness, letting the subject know that she should, in fact, always “be scared”:

Five days ago Vaca, a fat, humongous individual (not Gat0Vaca, I could never see that one), brought a can of insecticide and sprayed us. After a while he entered our room again and put a gun in my mouth. “It’s loaded,” he said. “You’re scared aren’t you?” I didn’t move. Maybe this is why the whole business of toothbrushes seemed so absurd. The fact was that a few minutes later he appeared again and gave us each a toothbrush and toothpaste. “From now on,” he solemnly announced, “you’ll brush your teeth once a day.” ...Today, at noon, he took away the brushes. A while ago, Vaca entered our room and pointed a gun at my temple. I felt the cold of the metal. “It’s loaded,” he said. “Are you scared?” (pp. 81-82).

Scenes such as this, indicate a certain repetitiveness in Partnoy’s narrative, whereby each torture doubles itself, comes back to itself, all in order to haunt the subject. In fact, it is this quality of repetition mixed with a constant silence, the subject awaiting the future—torture, death, release—that renders this text as a virtual embodiment of torture. Partnoy consciously does not “tell all” in this *testimonio* as a means of evoking the sensation of torture: a space where knowledge is unidirectional and the prisoners, like the reader, are rarely given any useful information. Much of the text is concerned with the most trivial information—the only information available to the prisoners who

¹¹ Partnoy writes of her daily habits: “Lunch was at 1:00 P.M. and dinner at 7:00 P.M.; we went without food for eighteen consecutive hours daily. We were constantly hungry. I lost 20 pounds, going down to 95 pounds (I am 5 ft. 5 in.). Added to the meager food, the lack of sugar or fruits, was the constant state of stress that made our bodies consume calories rapidly. We ate our meals blindfolded, sitting on the bed, plate in lap. When we had soup or watery stew, the blows were constant because the guards insisted that we keep our plates straight. When we were thirsty, we asked for water, receiving only threats or blows in response. For talking we were punished with blows from a billy jack, punches, or removal of our mattresses. The atmosphere of violence was constant. The guards put guns to our heads or mouths and pretended to pull the trigger” (p. 15).

struggle against the constant fear of violence, of death. It is this focus upon the small details of the quotidian that gives this narrative the ability to render “live” abstract concepts and small material items.

Throughout her *testimonio* language is used to materialize the bodies of the disappeared as language also conjures up the memory of those bodies one simply has difficulty in remembering:

For a while now I’ve been trying to recall how Ruth’s face looks. I can remember her big eyes, her almost non-existent little nose, the shape of her mouth. I recall the texture of her hair, the warmth of her skin. When I try to pull it all together, something goes wrong. I just can’t remember my daughter’s face. It has been two months since I’ve seen her. I want to believe that she’s safe. “Vasca! Do you remember my daughter’s face?” I whisper. “What?” “I said, do you remember my daughter’s face? I can’t...” “Of course I do, she’s so pretty” (p. 77).

Partnoy struggles between a desire to forget the present and to remember the past even by engaging other prisoners in the act of remembering. Yet when Vasca is later taken away, Partnoy keeps her jacket and remembers Vasca via the cold metal of the buttons, material objects replace those humans whose bodies are neither living nor dead: “While touching the thick fabric and the cold metal buttons, I recalled the times when I peeked under the blindfold to see Vasca. Then I cried again. That was the night before yesterday, after they’d taken her away. To kill her, someone had told me” (p. 110). At times there is a sense of matter-of-factness to this *testimonio* which undercuts any sentimentality while plainly relating the chilling realities of the narrators’ existence in *La escuela*.¹² It is the coldness of the writing, the stultified nature of the memories, and the occasional fluidity between past and present moments that render Partnoy’s *testimonio* a body of language that circumscribes corporeality between the lines and which depends upon language to remember the many bodies—living, dead, and disappeared:

This small box of matches is my only belonging. Sometimes I own a piece of bread, and once I even had an apple. But this box is my only non-edible belonging. Now I keep my box under the pillow. Every so often I touch it to make sure it is still there, just because inside that little box is a piece of myself: my tooth. When I hit my tooth against the iron gate it didn’t hurt very much; it only made my lips bleed. When the dentist had originally fixed my tooth six years ago he told me, ‘This is going to last twenty years.’ To tell the truth, the tooth that broke the other day wasn’t mine. The tooth, made of acrylic, with a metal point, was permanently attached to the root canal. It fell out when I was coming back from the latrine and the guards pushed me against the iron grate. My mother locked herself in the bathroom to cry when my real tooth broke. It

¹² Scenes such as this evoke the coldness of the facts without falling into sentimentality while also carefully negotiating the stark realities of each character’s situation: “She took off the rest of her clothes. She felt as if the guards did not exist, as if they were just repulsive worms that she could erase from her mind by thinking of pleasant things...like rain falling inside the cans, her conversation with María Elena. She thought the conversation had been worth it, despite the beatings that could come, despite humiliation. They tied her hands behind her back...Those two killers and been glancing through the pages of an encyclopedia. On the Chinese history page, they had seen a drawing of the Chinese torture method ‘the drop of water’; puzzled to see that there still existed tortures that they had not used, they wanted to try this one to see how it worked” (pp. 71-72).

happened at an amusement park when I was twelve. I did not have it repaired until I turned fifteen...It was in that age of perfect teeth that I started to feel it was okay to flirt, to want to be pretty. Now the acrylic wonder sleeps inside this Ranchera brand match box and I'm convinced that, with my eyes blindfolded, I deserve at least a mouthful of teeth. Do I want to look pretty for the guard, the torturers? I hope that what really matters to me is to be whole...meanwhile, I'm being destroyed. To be whole is to keep my tooth, either in my mouth or inside the matchbox, my sole belonging...Pato screams: 'Sit down!' While he unties our hands for lunch, I put the tooth in the box. The little match box will bring me trouble. Sooner or later a guard is going to decide that the box is a dangerous object in my hands. Right now it's my only possession (pp. 87-90).

Partnoy's tooth becomes the physical locus for memory, a confirmation of life through materiality and her resistance against death. This narrative spirals the tedious experiences of the everyday, taking the reader in a backward trajectory from the tooth which is carefully hidden in the matchbox, to the moment when Partnoy lost her tooth after being pushed by the guard, to the first time she lost this tooth when she was twelve years of age. The memory of the tooth evidences Partnoy's sense of her self-consciousness regarding her body since what this tooth—or rather its loss—represents is a conterminous loss of attractiveness, femininity, sociability and sexuality. This memory also parallels her current condition of imprisonment where she experiences these same losses due to, instead of her tooth's loss, her entire body's disappearance. She displaces her own disappearance, however, by adapting to this nightmarish world of torture where she inserts her identity in a child-like world of small objects: she keeps dried bread rolled up into balls which serve as a mental diversion as does her tooth carefully hidden away in her matchbox which is symbolic of the only component in her life directly under her control. As her tooth is a "piece" of herself, the tooth becomes her own objectification of her identity such that she actually "owns" herself by virtue of holding on to the tooth she so carefully guards.

What is most interesting about *The Little School House* is how Partnoy manifests the body of the tortured through the language of memory and poetry while also invoking the emptiness and the silence of *non-being* of the *desaparecidos*. Partnoy clearly distinguishes between the body of the tortured and the body of the disappeared—the first body is clearly visible and bears the "marks" of the "verbal objectification" for having failed to "properly" answer questions, while the disappeared is simply a body, absent and which bears no language, no physical demarcations, and which is entirely without place.¹³ This *testimonio* uses language to conjure the body while it is tortured and in turn this body resists torture by utilizing language to deflect the pain, to transport the tortured into a space which is neither past, nor present. Here, Partnoy's

¹³ Elaine Scarry writes of this dynamic of language and the body: "But the very consistency of these oppositions between body and voice means that the two also mirror one another. Assigned identical positions, they reflect and amplify one another. Just as the pain is a physical measure of the colossal discrepancy between the person tortured and the torturer (for whatever their spatial proximity, there are no two experiences farther apart than suffering and inflicting pain), so the interrogation is the verbal objectification of that colossal discrepancy. In his desperate insistence that his questions be answered, the tortures luxuriates in the privilege or absurdity of having a world that the other has ceased to have. Nowhere does language come so close to being the concrete agent of physical pain as here where it not only occurs in such close proximity to the raising of the rod or the turning on of the electricity, but also parallels and thereby doubles the display of distance" (p. 46).

husband is being tortured as he attempts to escape the pain through language and the imaginary:

Daughter, dear, my tongue hurts and I can't say *rib-bit rib-ribit*; even if I could, you wouldn't hear me. This little poem soothed you when you cried; you went to sleep listening to it...I've repeated it for a whole day but I still can't sleep. *Rib-bit rib-bit he sings on the roof...*I won't see you again...The electric prods on my genitals...Trapped, like the little frog...*but we hear him all the time*. I told the torturers if they took me to the meeting place I would point to him; then, when I saw him I didn't do what I'd promised. Afterward, the electric prod again, and the blows...harder: 'Where is he?' But my child...*Rib-bit rib-bit...*Where are you, my little girl?...Don't make me believe I'm an animal. But that's not my scream; that's an animal's scream. Leave my body in peace..I'm a froggy so my child can play with me...*Rib-bit rib-bit little girl on the roof...Nobody, nobody...*I'm thirsty—Sir...sir...water please (p. 93).¹⁴

Here the body of the tortured is trapped in a state of being over which it has no control and relies upon the imaginary, the children's poem, as its "intentional object". This poem, like Partnoy's rolled up bread pieces and her tooth, are the objects which refract the body of the present, the body of pain, the body whose only control is that of the mind: the imaginary.¹⁵

Yet, how to represent the *desaparecidos*—those who are not present, whose voices cannot be invoked and whose bodies are simply gone *as if they never were living*? In an interesting extra-narrative effort, Partnoy creates a map of *La escuela* two appendices to her *testimonio* wherein she inscribes each member of *La escuela*—from the prisoners to the guards—carefully naming each one. Linking the living survivors to the living interrogators, Partnoy creates a nexus through language in which these bodies are inextricably connected through the text. Likewise, she textually evidences those disappeared whose bodies are neither living nor dead, but which are simply "gone". The *desaparecidos* exist as traces of the past tense, of "having been", marked upon the pages of this *testimonio* through language. Yet, their bodies are also narratively pulled into the present as homage is paid to the memories of their spirits through this textual remembering. It could be easily argued that this text serves two contradictory functions: it embodies the funeral rites denied to so many bodies which were never put to rest while it also serves not to remind the living of the *desaparecidos*, that this was indeed a brutal fact of Argentina's history and not, as some state, an fabrication of the Left.¹⁶

¹⁴ *El Sapito Glo-glo-glo* is an Argentinian children's poem.

¹⁵ Scarry discusses the relationship between pain and the imaginary: "Physical pain, then, is an intentional state without an intentional object; imagining is an intentional object without an experienceable intentional state. Thus, it may be that in some peculiar way it is appropriate to think of pain as the imagination's intentional state, and to identify the imagination as pain's intentional object. Of course, it is probably inaccurate to identify an essentially objectless state as an "intentional state without an object" since only by having an object does it exist as an intentional state: in isolation, pain "intends" nothing; it is wholly passive; it is "suffered" rather than willed or directed" (p. 164).

¹⁶ Michael Taussig writes of *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*: "What the Mothers of the Disappeared do is to collectively harness this magical power of the lost souls of purgatory and relocate memory in the contested public sphere, away from the fear-numbing and crazy-making fastness of the individual mind where paramilitary death squads and the State machinery of concealment would fix

The most haunting body manifested in Partnoy's narrative is that of the son to whom Graciela, one of the *desaparecidos*, gave birth while in prison. After Graciela was disappeared, her son was given to one of the interrogators, as was a quite common practice. This element of the story embodies the truly cruel aspect of the *neobarroco* — the loss of the body, the mother, the family. And yet, this fact demonstrates the *mestizaje* of bodies and political ideologies from which there is no clear escape. The irony of Graciela's child is that he, like many other children of the *desaparecidos* born during the mother's incarceration, live in a nation which struggles to recognize its past and which, more often than not, has forgotten who the "guards" really were. This public amnesia, which is also quite common in Chile for instance, refuses that which it cannot see. In effect, the strategy of the military *junta* was a success because it feeds the twisted logics of those who say "What disappeared? Where?" Yet, many of the *hijos de los desaparecidos* are beginning to ask questions in a country which often denies them answers. Interestingly enough, some of those infants who were given to the interrogators are beginning to find out who their "real parents" were, and who their actual parents *really* are. This is certainly a chilling reality and a surreal embodiment of ancestry that Argentina must confront. This *mestizaje* of identity is a mixing that is not a racial combination of bodies from across the globe, but instead is an absolutely cruel mixture of identities based upon the theft of certain persons — taking them from the earth, swallowing up their identities as if they never were while their children are raised within the space of a fictionalized "family photo" that in every frame bears the absence of the *desaparecida*, the mother. The *realismo mágico* of Argentina is just this: the numbing excess of *absence* and the conflicting public narratives that either invoke the bodies of the *desaparecidos* through language or that *doubly disappear* the *desaparecidos* by denying the political events in Argentina from 1976 through 1983.

The *barroco* is the space in which identity is never stable, never what it seems through historical inscription and it is, at times, completely unequivocal as the scene of both representation and life often renders identity as disappeared, as absent. The *barroco* negotiates these very contradictions engendered by nation, race, gender and sexuality such that identity is not only unstable, but identity is often "kidnapped" from the very scene of its creation. Perhaps we might begin to see how the spiraling dislocations and rereadings of history render identity in Latin America a necessarily *magically real* undertaking: the terrains upon which identity is fought, dialogued, tortured and disappeared are those of language and the body which are constantly being rewritten and which engender conterminous belief and disbelief. *Realismo mágico* invokes the discontinuity of narratives that are both peaceful and violent, real and imaginary, through bodies and texts that invoke, constantly and always, these contradictory readings. But identity in Latin America is not only a crossing between the binaries of masculine/feminine or real/imaginary, but identity is also located in the space where body and language traverse all these possible valences, breaking down, once and for all, the rigid definitions of not only gender, but the barrier that gender shares with sex or language, for instance.

Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* (1972) is a novel which makes heterogeneous sexual,

it. In so courageously naming the names and holding the photographic image of the dead and disappeared, the mothers create the specific image necessary to reverse public and State memory. As women, giving birth to life, they collectively hold the political and ritual lifeline to death and memory as well" (p. 27).

gender and sexed identity, while also dissolving national and ethnic identity. *Cobra* recounts the tale of a transvestite, star of the Teatro lírico de Muñecas (Lyrical Theater of the Dolls), whose obsession is to transform his/her body. Cobra is accompanied in her metamorphosis by the Madam and Pup, Cobra's dwarfish double. They too change shape, through the violent ceremonies of a motorcycle gang, into a sect of Tibetan lamas seeking to revive Tantric Buddhism. This is a novel of simulation that hyper-teleologically impels the somatic and language towards a baroque aesthetic of "makeovers," performances, inversions, deaths, and resurrections. This novel pushes forth Sarduy's notion of the *doublure* of the body and language through an evocation of the signs that consistently recreate their references and hence, reciprocally reinscribe their own value, destroying any notion of continuity of identity, of the self, of sex, of sexuality, of reality, or of any static meaning or signification. The imaginary within this novel serves as Sarduy's arena of the *dédoublement* of identity — the imaginary coalesces the formation of national and sexual identities polemicizing both the grand narratives of History (i.e. Colon and Cortés) and the master narratives Sexuality (i.e. *machismo* and heterosexuality) in Latin America. *Cobra* reveals a plurality of national and sexual identities that draw nature (the body) into a symbolic sphere of reinscribing the "lost" or "forgotten" histories and the elided sexualities. The baroque of language and of the somatic throughout this novel attempts to undo nature (*deshacer la naturaleza*) in evoking a realm of the imaginary and the hallucinatory that transforms the historical and cultural paradigms of power into a *pastiche* of the perversion of these very paradigms.

Cobra, a transvestite night-club singer, performs in the *Teatro lírico de Muñecas* where the club's headmistress, *la Señora*, and Cobra's midget double, Pup, involve Cobra in a world of theater, men, art, and drugs where the body and language come together to recreate Cobra's sex, gender and ethnic identity.¹⁷ Cobra's signification of woman, however, is not complete as long as the referents of the "true woman," *la Señora*, and the "imitation," Pup, surround her. She leaves for India and Nepal, making a counter-pilgrimage to the East, signifying her—and Cuba's—links to this part of the world.¹⁸ After returning, Cobra exercises her penultimate act of simulation in a scene recreated from Von Sternberg's 1933 film, *Morocco*, in which Cobra attempts to realize the *hiper-mujer*, as she imitates Marlene Dietrich's character who is, in the film, cross-dressed as a man. This play of the manifold possibilities of space (theater, film, literature, reality, Morocco, Eastern Asia, and Cuba) and of the body (Cobra as woman, Cobra as Amy Jolly, Marlene Dietrich as woman, and Dietrich as transvestite) establishes Cobra's identity within the complex network of symbolic codes—a network within which Cobra must ultimately efface through her sex-change operation and her escape from the theater.

¹⁷ Sarduy writes of this theatre as a showplace where the body is never real, but always mechanical: "¿dios mío—en el tocadiscos, como es natural, Sonny Rollins—¿por qué me hiciste nacer si no era para ser absolutamente divina?—gemía desnuda, sobre una piel de alpaca, entre ventiladores y móviles de Calder—. ¿De qué me sirve ser reina del Teatro Lírico de Muñecas, y tener la mejor colección de juguetes mecánicos, si a la vista de mis pies huyen los hombres y vienen a treparse los gatos?" (p. 427).

¹⁸ Many of Sarduy's references to the characters directly reflects back to Cuban national and ethnic identity, such as in this instance where Sarduy notes Cuba's ethnicity as a *mestizaje* of Africa, China and the indigenous of Cuba.

As she sings in mise-en-scène recreated from the film, Cobra meets Dr. Ktazob,¹⁹ the doctor of her transsexual operation. It is through him that through Cobra reinvigorates meaning in her body, while also negating her body as “natural” and it is through the operation that Cobra’s body becomes the interstitial space of the crossings of sex and gender and becomes the canvas for writing the body:

La escritura es el arte de la digresión. Hablemos pues de un olor a hachís y a curry, de un basic english tropezante y de una musiquilla de baratijas. Esa ficha señalética es la del indio costumista, que tres horas antes de que se descorrieran los telones del show llegaba con su cajita de pinceles, sus minuciosos fracasos de tinta y «la sabiduría—decía el propio enturbantado, de perfil, mostrando su único arte—de toda una vida pintando la misma flor, dedicándola al mismo dios» (pp. 431-432).

Sarduy manifests the body as that which houses the art of writing, the restructuring of the body and the costuming of ethnicity. The body of Cobra is that body which crosses national and ethnic boundaries every bit as much as it crosses sexual and gendered divisions through a language which both destroys and creates, as does the knife of Dr. Katzob. The body of transsexual surgery *is* the textual body upon which the *barroco* is impressed upon the body and meaning is again transformed from the inside out:

Cobra aparece al fondo del coche, de pie contra la pared de lata, pájaro clavado contra un espejo. *Está maquillada con violencia, la boca de ramajes pintada. Las órbitas son negras y plateadas sde alúmina, estrechas entre las cejas y luego prolongadas por otras volutas, pintura y metal pulverizados, hasta las sienes, hasta la base de la nariz, en anchas orlas y arabescos como de ojos de cisne, pero de colores más ricos y matizados; del borde de los párpados penden no cejas sino franjas de ínfimas piedras preciosas. Desde los pies hasta el cuello es mujer; arriba su cuerpo se transforma en una especie de animal heráldico de hocico barroco.* Detrás, la curva del tabique multiplica sus follajes de cerámica, repetición de crisantemos pálidos (p. 497).

Language is the vehicle for the somatic subversion of Cobra as it is that which marks the text and the body; yet language is also informed by the body is marked by plurality of identities that are recreated by the subversion of the “natural” body.²⁰ The body is marked by the graphic, the pen, the paint and the knife which either temporarily or permanently renders a change—a change which is the “elipses” of identity, just as writing also is: “La escritura es el arte de la elipsis: en vano señalaríamos que de todas las agendas era la de Cobra la más frondosa” (p. 430).

Sarduy’s *Cobra* is a creature who becomes the catharsis of crossing genders, ethnicities and religion, for she is not only a woman in this text, but in every way a godlike figure that crosses sex and life forms. It is through the rewriting of the corporeal that Cobra *embodies* the literal and figurative restructuring of identity such

¹⁹ In Moroccan dialectical arabic *ktafi* (or *qtafi*) means “to cut” and *zob* mean “penis; hence “Katzob” literally means “Cut-penis”

²⁰ The narrator states: “La escritura es el arte de recrear la realidad. Respetémoslo. No ha llegado el artífice himalayano, como se dijo, alhajadito y pestiferante, sino con un recién planchado y viril traje cruzado color crema—en la corbata de seda una torre Eiffel y una mujer desnuda acostada sobre el letrero Folies Chéries...No. La escritura es el arte de restituir la Historia” (p. 432).

that the body is writing and writing is the body upon which disorder, chaos, interrupted meanings traverse as order is constantly imposed and overthrown:

La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y componer un desorden. La Señora había descubierto al indio entre los vapores de un baño turco, en los suburbios de Marsella. Quedó tan estupefacta cuando, a pesar del vaho reinante, distinguió las proporciones con que Vishnú lo había agraciado que, sin saber por qué—con estos jeroglíficos, y sin revelarnos que lo son, nos asombra el destino—pensó en Ganecha, el dios elefante (p. 435).

Here Cobra is not only the performative embodiment of woman, but she is the god-like reincarnation of a Hindu god—both male and female, animal and human, and both bound to earth and eternally drawn to the heavens. It is Cobra's desire to become other which finally brings her to India and then to the table of Dr. Katzob where she undergoes the transformation that begins her voyage into the ultimate dismantling of somatic, racial and gender meanings.

Cobra's body is made into an artifact of the baroque through which gang members she later encounters eventually come to worship, to tattoo, to torture, to name, to terrorize, and finally, to kill. The body, once again, is the topography of the graphic, of language and of violence through which each gang member attempts to transcend reality. It is through a "group sex" encounter that each gang member masturbates, Cobra narrates, milk spills, the bodies join in exchanging identity.²¹ In aiding the gang to achieve a form of inner sense, *aprender a respirar*, Cobra dies and it is here, once again, that her body takes on yet another somatic reincarnation, yet another identity.²² But the gang members want to keep alive her image and her body, unable to distinguish the somatic from the iconographic—Cobra remains intractably bound to both. Hence, they dress her up in men's clothing and re-embody her once again, as if they were trying to cancel her physical incarnation as woman, as the post-operative Cobra without a *zib*:

Con una silla y su ropa, empezó a armar la imagen del muerto. Le puso pantalones a las patas delanteras y un par de botas, vistió el espaldar con un suéter rojo, le abrochó un jacket de antílope, raído y sucio: en el dorso aún podía adivinarse un arco vertical abierto en la piel, chorreado, embebido en la felpa, retorcido como una serpiente macheteada; luego, como antaño, trazado de un solo gesto por un calígrafo de estilo anguloso, el círculo de la adivinación, torcido sobre sí mismo y sin bordes el aro perfecto; estampado por

²¹ In *Le temps des tribus*, Michel Maffesoli contends that the exchange of words and sex are the indications of a society opening up to the other: "Tous les grands moments d'effervescence sociale qui sont liés au rythme du temps ont tous, d'une manière affirmée ou à leur corps défendant, un aspect initiatique. Lors du carnaval par exemple, la circulation de biens (dons, vols, déprédations...), la circulation du sexe (échangisme, inversion, orgies...) ou la circulation de la parole (expression libre multiple et variées...), tout cela entend apprendre à la jeunesse, et par là-même redire pour soi-même, que toute société repose sur l'échange, sur l'ouverture à l'altérité, et que c'est la réaffirmation ponctuelle de ces aspects qui, au-delà de la pensateur naturelle, constitue le moteur de la perdurance" (p. 172).

²² —¡Qué vida la mía—suspiró—: debo encontrarme al este para el equinoccio de primavera, al sur para el solsticio de verano, en pleno oeste cuando rompe el otoño y en el norte extremo en lo más crudo del invierno! Me voy pues —y se abre, otra vez sola, la puerta cuarteada. Antes de franquearla se torna por última vez el Único hacia la muchedumbre distraída y sentencia: ACONSEJO LA INGESTIÓN DE PÉTALOS (p. 544).

un cuño de piedra, junto al círculo un sello cuadro: BR; lacerado junto al hombro una A (p. 549).

By tattooing her body, the gang members inscribe meaning—her name—upon her body whereby the body and language are one and identity occupies the space where the physical and language reflect each other in their meanings. In the case of Cobra, however, language and the body suffocate each other with excess, or as Totem states: “Cobra: para que envenene. Para que ahogue. Para que se enrosque alrededor de sus víctimas y las asfixie. Para que hipnotice con el aliento y sus ojos brillen en la noche, enormes, de oro” (p. 522).

Cobra evidences language and the somatic as the terrains which inflect and redefine one another through the violence of rendering identity—be it through the paintbrush, pen, performance or knife. Sarduy’s text is the apotheosis of the *neobarroco* which contains all the bodies of history, gender, sex and torture and projects this rich his terrain of intersecting discourses and inscriptions upon the body. In *Cobra* there is no “effeminized victim” nor is there the struggle to render active the passive voice. Sarduy’s narrative demonstrates *realismo mágico* as a consciousness that pervades the act of writing and perceiving the world—for Sarduy brings identity into the afterlife where, like the unknown of history, identity will continue to be constructed and where it will necessarily take on a variety of shapes as if a Hindu god. Sarduy manifests identity as both *intertextualidad* and *intersexualidad* where language and the body are forever bound up in each other and simultaneously never cease signification.²³ It is this constant reshaping and reformatting that Sarduy locates as the nexus of Cuban identity: a racial, sexual, linguistic and cultural *mestizaje* that has no finite ending. For once dead, Cobra’s memory, like Cuba’s history, remains to be re-named and re-inscribed and the novel paradoxically ends at the beginning (“*Al alba empezaremos de nuevo...*” (p. 262) with a reincarnation of Cobra’s memory and body. The *doublure* of the body within this novel is a part of Sarduy’s *hiper-telico* that resists any confirmation or homogenization of identity through the exercise of the marginal sexual practices (i.e. sado-masochism and homosexuality), the use of various somatic inscriptions (i.e. cross-dressing, *tatouage*, and make-up), and the translation of national and cultural identities which form Cuba (i.e. the conversion to Buddhism and the East/West dialectic persistently evoked within the novel). For Sarduy, the quiescence of identity through the *imitation* of nature or the sanctification of history results in the

²³ Sarduy writes: “El travestismo, tal y como lo practica la novela de Donoso, sería la metáfora mejor de lo que es la escritura: lo que Manuela nos hace ver no es una mujer *bajo la apariencia* de la cual se escondería un hombre, una máscara cosmética que al caer dejara al descubierto una barba, un rostro ajado y duro, sino *el hecho mismo del travestismo*. Nadie ignora, y sería imposible ingorarlo dada la evidencia del disfraz, la nitidez del artificio, que Manuela es un ajetreado bailarín, un hombre disimulado, un *capricho*. Lo que Manuela muestra es la coexistencia, en un solo cuerpo, de significantes masculinos y femeninos: la tensión, la repulsión, el antagonismo que entre ellos se crea. A través de un lenguaje simbólico lo que este personaje significa es el pintarrajeo, la ocultación, el encubrimiento. Cejas pintadas y barba: esa máscara enmascara que es una máscara: esa es la «realidad» (sin límites, puesto que todo es contaminado por ella) que el héroe de Donoso *enuncia*. Esos planos de intersexualidad son análogos a los planos de intertextualidad que constituyen el objeto literario. Planos que dialogan en un mismo exterior, que se responden y completan, que se exaltan y definen uno al otro: esa interacción de texturas lingüísticas, de discursos, esa danza, esa parodia es la escritura” (p. 1151).

necessary death of creation, the death of the body, and the reinscription of writing.

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